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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of the "Immigrant Resource Project" preschool program is evaluated. The preschools meet for two hours twice a week while the childrens' parents are in English as second language classes. Pupils range in age from 2 to 6 years and are drawn from a wide variety of immigrant backgrounds. The objectives are to teach English and foster social and cultural adjustment. English is introduced through songs and stories. Cultural and social adjustment are fostered through child-teacher interactions focusing on appropriate play behavior, experiences with toys and play environments, the learning of social frames, and the development of positive self-concepts outside of the family. It is concluded that the project is successfully providing linguistic, educational, and social services for both immigrant children and their parents. (RW)

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An Assessment of the Immigrant Resources Project Preschools

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Opening the door to an Immigrant Resources Project preschool is like opening the door to a miniature United Nations in operation. Children from many ethnic groups are playing, exploring, painting, dressing up, in a new experience of learning and communicating together. To look in upon an I.R.P. preschool is to witness an exciting stage in the evolution of multicultural education in British Columbia.

The Immigrant Resources Project (I.R.P.) was conceived in Vancouver in 1975 to provide non-English-speaking immigrant families with training in the English language. The I.R.P. receives private funding from organizations such as the Vancouver Foundation, Endeavour, and the Elks Club, and receives public funding from the Secretary of State and the Vancouver School Board. The project office is currently located in the Britannia Community Centre and is administered by a small staff assisted by many volunteers.

An important part of the I.R.P. is the preschool program, consisting of seven preschool groups. The preschool groups were established to meet the needs of the children of immigrants attending language classes in various schools in the community. Families with young children are recruited by bilingual home-school workers from the East Indian, Chinese, Italian, Greek, and more recently the Vietnamese communities. The children are placed in classes consisting of approximately fifteen to twenty children between two and six years of age (the majority are three to four years of age). The class sessions are two hours in length and are held twice a week. Most of the groups meet in basement halls or lunchrooms; one group meets in a kindergarten room.

Each preschool group is taught by a trained preschool teacher with one or two volunteer assistants. The preschool program follows a curriculum guide designed by the program staff. A variety of equipment and materials is provided for the children, although such items are necessarily restricted to those that the teacher and assistants can set up and pack away at the beginning and end of each session. Equipment found in most schools includes puzzles, blocks, pegboards, beads, and stacking toys; large muscle equipment such as tricycles, rideable trucks, and hoops; and construction materials such as play dough, paint, paper and glue. In addition to the regular curriculum, a special activity, such as cookie decorating or planting of seeds may be planned for a particular day.

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LEARNING ENGLISH

A major objective of the project is to offer families a basic knowledge of English. While parents are in English classes, their preschoolers nearby are learning English informally through games, songs, stories and dramatic play. Children are constantly exposed to English in their interactions with the preschool teacher. Volunteers, who speak several languages, will often use English but will also respond to a child in a native language when necessary. Children gradually learn to follow their teacher's directions in English.

Many children at first communicate only non-verbally; they may resort to tapping an adult gently on the chin to direct attention to their work or needs. Teachers learn to tolerate frequent tappings from the children during the first weeks of school. The children's ability to understand basic English instructions develops slowly through listening, observing, and following directions. Listening and comprehension, manifested at first by non-verbal cues — nodding of the head and following instructions — are generally understood to be essential prerequisites for the ensuing language production.

Children in these preschools use their own language freely at first; they can be heard chattering in Mandarin, Cantonese, Hindi, Laotian, but gradually they begin to use a few English words, the most frequently heard being the insistent, "teacha". The teacher tries to conduct a brief circle each day although it is difficult to do this with the limited attention span of some of the youngest members. She may include a few simple action songs in the lesson and read a short story. Meaning is gleaned from the songs through active participation. For example, children enjoy hammering their fists in "Peter Hammers with One Hammer", and they love to "quack" and "moo" through the popular song, "Old MacDonald had a Farm".

Introducing language via story books is another technique employed by the teachers. For preschoolers, a story's message is usually conveyed through pictures. By holding up a book such as "The Three bears", the teacher can point to appropriate pictures and focus the children's attention on key words such as "bear", "baby", and "bed". The children's attention is drawn to particular concepts by the teacher. Repetition of short phrases "too big", "too small", "just right", helps develop a connection between sounds and meanings of words. With stimulation, children struggle to express ideas in their new language. The book corner is often the area where they practise their first English words. They can be overheard there chatting informally with their friends about the books they have "read".

The progress the children make in English will depend on many factors: their hours of exposure to English, their motivation and intelligence, and the attitudes of their parents towards learning the new language. Children's expressions often reflect inaccuracies in their parents' speech which may be due to native language interference. A child may continue to use his parents' model "He go", "He have two shoe", for some time. Visiting a preschool one might hear "sentences" such as these:

"Yucky!"

"I got banana." "I got lot banana."

"She kid." (She's a baby)

"Ah go home."

"I'm going to play sandbox. Look what I do."

"Her sick."

Some children have pronunciation problems, some mix their first language in with English, and some are simply making the same developmental language errors that all English-speaking children make.

Most children begin to formulate their first language before the age of three. They continue to develop grammar and vocabulary until, at about age five, they can form sentences correctly with a repository of roughly 1500 words. Around this age, Canadian children enter the public school system at the kindergarten level where they are expected to learn the alphabet, to count to ten, to recognize and name colours and shapes and become familiar with the basic vocabulary of family, food, animals, et cetera.

Unlike his/her English-speaking counterpart at age five, however, the immigrant child has rarely gained mastery of English, the working language of the classroom. Since it has been shown that success in the majority language correlates highly with future success in school, the immigrant child starts school with a decided disadvantage in comparison to other students.

FOSTERING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Child-Teacher Interaction

Of equal or greater importance to learning English as a second language, however, is the need for the child to adjust to the expectations of a new culture. Immigrant Resources Project preschools may give children, and indeed the family, their first encounter with Canadian culture. At the age of three or four, children move out of the protective cocoon of their immediate families and begin to experience the influences of a wider community. Through the preschool, a child and family are exposed to a gentle version of the impersonal institutions they will encounter later.

When an immigrant family meets a new culture, a time of confusion and adjustment naturally occurs. Cultural adjustment is a complex and challenging process, not only for children but also for the immigrant population to which they belong. Adjustment to obvious differences in clothing, eating, and living styles is more easily managed than adjustment to the values lying beneath the surface of everyday living.

When families immigrate, their children, upon entering school, become the interface with a new culture. The child-rearing practices that families bring with them often come into opposition with those they meet in the preschool. Parents of beginning preschoolers notice this conflict in their relationship with their children. They may ask, for example, why their children do not listen to them

any more,or why their children talk back to them. The children's behaviours are reflecting a new mode of interacting with adults. In North America, a middle-class democratic parent, as opposed to an authoritarian parent, allows a more open atmosphere in the home. This style of parenting allows the child to be more assertive and self-motivated in structuring his own learning environment. Immigrant children, however, who may come from an authoritarian background, do not view the adult as a means through which they can structure experiences. As a result, they are often under-assertive and withdrawn in the classroom or overly-aggressive and attention-seeking. They may find it difficult to establish an acceptable way of relating to the adults in their environment because of the conflict between their culture's child-rearing patterns and those of the new culture. A preschool exposes a family to cultural differences which stem from child-rearing practices early enough to change behaviour before the trauma of public school entry occurs. Immigrant children's success in school will largely depend upon their ability to approach adults confidently and their perceiving them as a source of learning. IRP preschools create an environment where children are encouraged to approach the teacher and take the initiative in furthering their own learning. One way of helping the child to develop this initiative is through play.

Children learn through play no matter what nationality they are. A good teacher can develop a unit on health and the doctor by playing with the children. Medical props are set out on a table in the housekeeping corner. The teacher models appropriate play behaviour as she introduces the children to new vocabulary: "stethoscope", "cough", "pills", "doctor". The teacher withdraws as the children begin to play and use the play materials with appropriate English words on their own. The teacher, by initiating the play and interacting with the children on their level, introduces the children to a mode of interacting with adults that may not previously have been part of their behavioural pattern.

Child-Material Interaction

Another obstacle to adjustment for immigrant preschoolers lies in the immigrant child's lack of familiarity with certain equipment and materials usually found in North American preschools. Many toys in the preschool introduce the child to the basic concepts of size, shape, and colour. Under guidance with these educational materials children develop basic skills and concepts of classifying, ordering, sequencing, et cetera. Researchers have stressed the importance of early exposure to schooling for learning concepts of a cognitive nature. Formal schooling helps children move from concrete to abstract modes of thinking and facilitates their over-all cognitive development.

Preschools may provide families with their first exposure to the idea that a room set up for play can provide children with necessary learning experiences. Through dramatic play in the housekeeping corner children begin to use one object to represent another. The doll becomes a sick patient, for example. The ability to make one object represent another in play is an example of early practice in using symbols. This stage is necessary for more abstract thinking at a

later stage of development. Table toys help children organize their thinking: grouping or matching toy animals, sequencing rods or pieces of a train and comparing shapes in puzzles or magnet boards, all encourage the development of logical thinking.

A well-trained teacher will guide the children in extracting specific learning experiences from a play environment. In turn, the teacher will interpret these learning experiences for the parents — parents who may not have been aware of such early possibilities for their children.

SOCIALIZATION

The hardest of all tasks for an immigrant child in a regular school is to develop a positive self-concept. This may be due to the insecurity the whole family suffers during a period of adjustment to a new culture. The child's identity is dependent upon a group identity which in turn depends on the position the family held in the old culture. When a family immigrates they may lose their sense of belonging to a group. Their old identity may be lost with no new one immediately apparent, or, as is very often the case with immigrants, it may be regained at the lowest level of the socio-economic structure. The preschool helps children develop their own sense of identity separate from that of their families. Each child is treated as an individual and is encouraged to direct his/her own learning. Attitudes of self motivation and independence may be difficult for a family to accept because they may be foreign to their own child-rearing patterns. Early socialization, however, encourages the child to be competent and self reliant, the basic attributes of a positive self concept.

An intangible benefit of socialization in early years is finding a friend for the first time. Children and their families suddenly begin to see the advantages of reciprocating visits and services with other families. Through the preschool, they meet other families with the same needs and recognize the value of socializing and the importance of having their children socialize. They exchange babysitting, rides, clothing, shopping, et cetera. For some ethnic groups, having friends outside the immediate families has not been a custom.

Built into the curriculum is the learning of certain social frames. Frames may include a gamut of expectations specific to a learning area or situation. A child familiar with the expectations of playing in a block corner, for example, will stay within the limits of that frame whereas a newcomer may have to be told not to carry the blocks away or not to knock down another child's tower. Social frames include many learned behaviours. Sitting quietly in a circle, learning to handle blocks appropriately, eating together, cleaning up, or preparing to go home are all frames with limits and expectations specific to a school setting. Over time, children learn appropriate behaviour for certain activities. Understanding and operating within social frames is important for school adjustment. In schools where cultural diversity exists, careful training is important to encourage the learning of social frames, particularly since smooth entry into kindergarten demands that these frames be in place.

CONCLUSIONS

The Immigrant Resources Project is successful in providing linguistic, educational and social services for both immigrant children and their parents. First, the project preschools provide the child with enough English to function in a new setting. Second, the parents' involvement with the preschool program increases awareness of a different style of teaching and learning. Third, the children are exposed to a learning environment. Finally, socialization in a friendly microcosm lessens the trauma of adjustment to the majority culture to be met later in elementary school. This adjustment is multi-faceted: kindergarten teachers state that in the first few days of school the children are less anxious about separation from home, they respond positively to the teacher, they understand the expectations, or the social frames of the classroom setting, and their command of English is adequate to function in a kindergarten classroom. Early exposure to preschool, therefore, provides many benefits for immigrant children and prevents the need for more costly services at a later stage in their schooling.

This program is an example of what could be done on a much larger scale to help new Canadians adjust more easily to their new culture. It needs public support and understanding to increase the services it provides and help more immigrants families. With more financial support, current facilities and programs could be improved at the preschool level. Lunch rooms and a teen community centre are less than ideal environments in which to hold a preschool. The children deserve more respect from us so they in turn will have more respect for their new country.

A great deal of knowledge and skill is needed to provide a program that meets the language needs of these children, let alone their social, emotional, intellectual and physical needs. The preschool teachers require specialized training in ESL at the preschool level. Their salaries are so far below those of other teachers, however, that it takes super-human dedication to continue working with the program. The children only attend classes for two hours, two days a week which does not provide the children with enough exposure to make optimal impact on their learning. With more funding available, the number of sessions could be increased and the rate of pay improved for the teachers. A further recommendation would be that more three- and four-year-old native English speakers be included in the program where possible.

The program relies heavily on the understanding and enthusiasm of the home-school workers who recruit families in their neighbourhoods and convince them of the benefits of the program. Parent education is an important service provided by the home-school workers and this whole aspect of the program needs further consideration. Volunteers also play an important part. Without their support the program would not be possible. They provide assistance to the preschool teacher as well as enable the program to be bilingual and bicultural. It is difficult, however, to maintain consistency and professional standards of teaching when the program is so dependent on untrained volunteer help.

Models of early education have often been fraught with difficulties and their long term benefits are still a subject of debate. Research is needed to establish a

sound theoretical base for preschools for immigrant children. Multinational playschools of this kind may yet be a step towards future successful integration of many cultures. The Immigrant Resource Project Preschools in Vancouver merit close observation and support. They are certainly one way of lessening racial tension in our society.

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